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Operation Barkhane and the Future of Intervention in the Sahel

The Shape of Things to Come

Denis M. Tull

France is preparing to change its posture in the Sahel. After a "mini surge" of 600 additional soldiers since February 2020, its counterterrorism Operation Barkhane is likely to revert to the pre-surge level, with more reductions possible in the medium term. Regardless of the details and timetable of the adjustments, French policy toward the Sahel is evolving as Paris seeks to balance a lighter military footprint with counterterrorism goals, the continued internationalization of intervention, and more local responsibility.

The return to the pre-surge level (4,500 soldiers) or perhaps even more reductions may come as a surprise, considering that the surge was effective in strictly military terms. According to Chief of Staff François Lecointre, it increased the volume of French forces directly involved in military operations by 70 percent. Two other factors amplified this impact. The surge went hand in hand with a strong focus on the three-borders area between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, which helped to turn quantity into quality. Finally, the long-planned armament of Barkhane's three Reaper drones, effective since December 2019, has enhanced the readiness of the force and sharply reduced its reaction time when presented with opportunities to strike. More than 40 percent of Barkhane's air strikes are now conducted by drones. These factors have contributed to numerous tactical successes in the year since the Sahel Summit in Pau (13 January 2020), when French President Emmanuel Macron and his five Sahelian counterparts from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger sought to reenergize the intervention. Among Barkhane's notable successes was the neutralization of Abdelmalek Droukdel, leader of AQMI (Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb), and of Bah Ag Moussa, a military commander of the Groupe de soutien à l'islam et aux musulmans (GSIM).

The post-Pau year has not fundamentally changed the political and security context, but it has given some reprieve to the armies of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso after a disastrous 2019, during which they suffered possibly more than a thousand casualties at the hands of jihadist groups. However, the year's events showed again that more counterterrorism does not translate into greater

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levels of security. The level of internal displacement in Mali has continued to rise — from 200,000 in November 2019 to 311,000 in October 2020 — also in the context of military operations during which the armies of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger allegedly committed numerous human rights abuses. The number of human rights abuses committed by community-based armed militias and jihadist groups has also risen.

An Evolving Political Posture

Why would Paris relinquish the additional personnel means that have proved so effective? Military adjustments, whether they are made in the short term or medium term, should not be seen in isolation from a possibly evolving policy. For example, in recent weeks and months, French officials have frequently engaged in the long-standing debate in Mali on whether the government in Bamako should seek to politically accommodate jihadist groups in one form or the other. Despite a well-versed intransigence on the necessity of countering terrorism, declarations by officials during the past 12 months can be interpreted as attempts to somehow modify the narrative and the strategy. Although the French rejection of dialogue with jihadists was always less clear-cut than is often assumed, recent declarations suggest that Paris is now being careful to not be seen as an obstacle to political pathways that may lead out of the crisis. Indicators are allusions to the porosity and ill-defined nature of armed groups, and rhetorical distinctions between local and international jihadists or between radicals and recuperable elements. Whatever one may think of the pertinence of these categories, the discourse may signal at a minimum a more ambiguous and possibly more accommodating stance toward the controversial issue of political dialogue with jihadists, even if the determination to fight them remains firm. Paris remains skeptical about the prospects of success of political accommodation, not least because past Bamako-led initiatives have made little headway.

If the French government excludes that it will itself negotiate with "terrorist groups," it is a different matter whether it will stand in Bamako's way, should Mali's authorities want to take that route. French discourse emphasizes Malian sovereignty. This is why the analogy with Afghanistan — where the United States negotiated bilaterally with the Taliban and excluded the Afghan government — is not pertinent. However, a litmus test for the French commitment has yet to come. A meaningful French alignment behind a Malian push toward dialogue would ultimately require Barkhane to put its military operations on hold, at least temporarily.

The evolving French posture is a pragmatic move of realpolitik, which takes into account that Mali's new military authorities have repeatedly affirmed their willingness to explore this route. Given how often French and other officials have bemoaned a lack of Malian leadership and ownership in the past, tacitly aligning behind the government is ultimately in Paris's best interest. The numerous military strikes of the past 12 months against jihadist targets do not necessarily contravene the idea of giving dialogue a chance. They also present a necessary move to alter the balance of power on the battlefield, which was dramatically unfavorable to the Malian government just one year ago. Moreover, France can only disengage on a positive note. Everything else would be a political and strategic failure.

Drivers of Change

The adjustments to the French posture have been looming for the past year. In January 2020, at the occasion of the Sahel Summit in Pau, Macron had shaken up an untenable situation by going public with two unexpected admissions. First, that governments and parts of the public in the Sahel entertain, at best, ambiguous attitudes toward the French, and to a lesser extent international intervention. Second, that the political and security trends in the Sahel were moving in the wrong direction, *despite* international intervention. In other words, Paris

had recognized the relative ineffectiveness of intervention as well as its fragile local legitimacy.

One year onward, the situation has somewhat evolved thanks to the surge, but within the narrow limits of what seems to be achievable. Indeed, Macron's pre-Pau analysis is unlikely to have fundamentally changed. This means that the government is unwilling to sustain a large, costly, and open-ended presence in the Sahel that is unable to catalyze strategic and political progress. At least in military terms, France may have achieved the best possible outcome. The visible successes of 2020 may provide an opportunity to start disengaging with the head held high.

One factor are the costs. Barkhane is a strategic burden. While the operation generates valuable experiences and lessons, other or newly emerging threats and theaters in France's and Europe's strategic environment are rising on the agenda (the EU's eastern borders, the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean, cyberspace) and will feature prominently in a revised Strategic Review of Defense and National Security that is in the making.

Barkhane presents significant financial costs (€695 million in 2019, and closer to €1 billion in 2020), which equals 76 percent of the country's expenditure for its military missions and operations at home and abroad. Amid the economic pressure caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, these costs may be more difficult to defend for an operation that has long been met with public indifference at home, and this despite the fact that the public considers terrorist attacks to be a major threat to national security. This suggests that the French are not necessarily convinced that Sahel-based terrorism is a major threat to France. Conversely, the French media and members of parliament have recently given more scrutiny to Operation Barkhane as the number of French casualties has grown. Since 2013, 51 French soldiers have lost their lives in the Sahel, but 30 of them have died just over the past two years. Although nothing suggests that Barkhane will be anything more than a minor issue ahead of the 2022 presidential elections, reducing costs and casualties can only be advantageous.

Barkhane: Successful Tactics, Little Progress

Decision-makers in Paris know that a more favorable situation to start disengagement will not emerge any time soon. Two such opportunities were missed: after the sweeping Serval campaign in 2013, and again in 2015, when the signing of the Mali peace accord provided a reasonably appropriate exit option. The limits of what French (military) intervention in the Sahel may realistically achieve have been evident for some time, not least to the French military itself. Indeed, it has become a truism to state that Barkhane's tactical successes do not translate into overall progress.

First, the political objectives that Barkhane was to support always remained vague and excessively optimistic. This is true for the idea that the military containment of the terrorist threat would somehow help create conditions for political progress in the guise of the Malian peace accord and security solutions, thanks to the revamping of local security and defense forces. In the absence of political reform, the capacity-building approach pursued by foreign partners (EUTM Mali) has shown modest results, while the implementation of the peace accord or other forms of political change has remained intangible. Barkhane labors in a strategic void.

Second, no political ambitions were attached to Barkhane itself. Barkhane's basic premise is to stay away from Malian politics. This is evident, for example, in the fact that Barkhane has avoided being drawn into the political and violent quagmire in Mali's central region. But Barkhane's purported claim to be apolitical by virtue of its counterterrorism focus is inconsistent on several accounts. Barkhane and its international allies have literally constituted a security umbrella under which political elites in Bamako and the north — basically

the signatories of the Algiers accord — have comfortably pursued their own self-interested agendas rather than face the consequences of their own (in)actions. Similarly, Barkhane's claim of being apolitical never had any credibility among Malians, who failed to understand why northern towns should be liberated from jihadists, but not from secessionist-leaning rebels. From this perspective, Barkhane was decisively involved in domestic politics, and any pretense to the contrary has only aroused mistrust and rumors about France's hidden agendas.

Finally, Barkhane's sheer presence and the steady French discourse on counterterrorism has not helped the emergence of a more nuanced analysis of the Mali situation. Important challenges other than terrorism have not received the attention they deserve by Malian, French, and international decision-makers. Nowhere has this been more evident than in central Mali, where absent or ineffective institutions, eroding social capital, and violent socioeconomic competition explain much of the ease with which armed groups, not only jihadists, have expanded their power and authority.

Outlook

France is likely to reduce its military footprint in the Sahel in the foreseeable future. This is driven by the accurate assessment that the counterterrorism-centered intervention framework, in place since 2014, has reached its limits. However, the choice is not between staying and withdrawing. French decision-makers will seek to strike a balance between the political goal of beginning disengagement and the possible consequences of such a process.

In the short run, a steep reduction in troop numbers would embolden jihadist groups and overwhelm partner armies in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Once troop reductions of some consequence set in, France is expected to make even greater use of remote warfare, such as intelligence cooperation, armed drones, special forces, and security force assistance. Mentoring local forces during military operations will remain high on the agenda to bring a qualitative edge to the long-term capacity-building that is the hallmark of much of the security force assistance in Mali. In this regard, the EU military training mission's (EUTM Mali) increasingly decentralized provision of training and advising the Malian army is welcome. But just as important, there should be a renewed push to negotiate with the Bamako military authorities' security-sector reform initiatives. There is no reason to expect the emergence of effective and self-sustaining defense and security forces as long as fundamental reforms (human resources, logistics, accountability) are frustrated by Malian officials.

The lighter French military footprint brings both opportunities and risks. Should Barkhane reduce its presence in the theater, jihadist forces will enjoy more freedom of movement. Consequently, this will expose the Malian army as well as foreign troops with EUTM, MINUSMA, and civilian organizations to greater risks of attacks. This makes intelligence even more important, to which Germany's MINUSMA contingent contributes via its drones. But casualties may still occur and will become a test for the European commitment to Mali and the Sahel. In this regard, a fresh debate about what is and is not at stake for Europe in the Sahel would be useful. German and European security are not directly threatened by the Sahel. The challenge is not so much terrorism and migration, but a smart policy that promotes legitimate political orders and may also inhibit the further regional spread of the crisis. Helping neighboring countries to become more resilient in a preventive sense should be a priority.

A lighter military footprint, and thus a lesser emphasis on terrorism, is an opportunity for a more balanced and nuanced conversation with Malian partners on political challenges to stabilization and ultimately peacebuilding. It will be decisive what local actors in the Sahel, and particularly in Mali, will make of the space that the prospect of a lighter French military presence may open up.

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